

virtues attached to merit and effort. Merit can be bought and helps to justify and sustain a rigged system that does not work well for all social classes. The dystopic society that was already depicted by Young has proven to become a reality. This book is pushing us to disabuse ourselves of the illusions created by the ideology of meritocracy and create a fairer society that does not justify the allocation of privilege based on merit but looks for more equality.

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Adam Przeworski: *Crises of Democracy*
Cambridge 2019: Cambridge University Press, 239 pp.

The political and economic contexts of consolidated democracies have changed markedly in recent decades. We have seen an end to the high growth rates of the post-war era, low-income wages have stagnated, intergenerational mobility has declined, and income and wealth are increasingly accumulating in the hands of the few. On the political front, declining popular support for democracy is observed as the traditional party systems are challenged by the rise of radical right parties that promote populist, anti-establishment, and xenophobic attitudes and policies. Add to this the most recent development: a global pandemic that has yielded emergency powers to democratic governments and made society (it is to be hoped temporarily) resemble some Orwellian dystopia in which citizens acquiesce to severely limited freedom of movement and social interactions. In addressing such challenges to democracy, it is

hard to think of a timelier book than *Crises of Democracy*.

At its core, *Crises of Democracy* is about democratic deconsolidation. The book adds to a recent surge of academic and popular writings that offer perspectives on the state of democracy that differ widely in their degree of optimism. Yet *Crises of Democracy* is not like many of the other recent contributions. Rather than trying to convince the reader of a certain perspective on the current state of democracy, Przeworski invites us on a tour of the most important academic debates and encourages us to engage critically with the evidence at hand as well as with recent events and developments. Przeworski acknowledges early on that ‘some readers will be disappointed by how often’ the book fails ‘to arrive at firm conclusions’, while stressing that ‘one should not believe the flood of writings that have all the answers’ (p. xii). The book, therefore, is probably best understood as a critical discussion of the state of democracy and of related academic work. It raises many important, and difficult, questions, most of which are left unanswered, but may serve as a source of contemplation and inspiration for future academic work.

The heart of the book is divided into three parts with a clear, logical structure. It starts with the premise that if we wish to understand crises of democracy, we need to clarify what we mean by ‘democracy’ and ‘crisis’. Przeworski adopts a minimalist/electoralist view of democracy and therefore focuses on ‘possible threats to elections becoming non-competitive or inconsequential for whoever remains in power’ (p. 5). Through a clever discussion of the defining features of democracy, Przeworski unarms critics who advocate for a more particular definition of democracy and clarifies that ‘possible threats’ should be understood broadly to include attacks on the preconditions of contested elections – such as liberal rights and freedoms – erosion of judicial independence,

loss of confidence in representative institutions, high levels of inequality, and the use of repression to maintain public order. This clarifying introductory discussion also serves to exemplify the many different factors that can pose a threat to democratic rule, and which we should be on the lookout for.

The first part of the book illuminates the lessons of the past by analysing historical data as well as four historical cases in which democracy faced an existential crisis. At the risk of oversimplifying, the historical analysis informs us that democracy is at the highest risk of dying in countries that have (1) an uneasy experience with democracy and (2) democratic institutions that are not conducive to majority rule. Moreover, poor economic conditions – for instance, low levels of economic development and growth and high levels of inequality – as well as intense political and societal divisions are strong predictors of democratic backsliding (chapters 2 and 3). Yet the author stresses that while certain conditions can increase (or decrease) the risk of democratic deconsolidation, in the end it is the actions of people that are decisive. Looking to both the present and the future, we can thus only use history as a guide to identify the *signs* of democratic crises; we cannot use it to predict outcomes in real time.

Informed by the historical analysis in part 1 of the book, part 2 explores the signs and potential causes of democratic crises in present-day democracies. In chapter 5, Przeworski highlights three signs of potential democratic crisis: (1) the erosion of the traditional party systems, (2) the rise of populist radical-right parties, and (3) the decline of support for democracy in public opinion surveys. With respect to the declining voter base of traditional centre-left and centre-right parties and the rise of new – in particular right-wing populist – parties (signs 1 and 2), Przeworski notes that, considering the universality of this phenome-

non, ‘something strange is going on’ (p. 87). Yet, he also acknowledges that it remains unclear whether these developments, in fact, are ominous signs for democracy. It may be that new parties have an easier time adapting to a rapidly changing world, and thereby respond to shifting voter sentiments, whereas the ‘old’ parties, bound by tradition and history, are slower at adapting their policy stances. In recent years, for instance, the popularity of green parties has boomed, as climate change and the environment have become salient issues. This exemplifies how the book often refrains from making strong claims, but instead provides insightful discussions of recent political and economic developments. Przeworski, however, is unusually clear on whether declining support for democracy, as observed in public opinion surveys, is a troubling sign for democracy, discounting this trend by arguing that ‘one should not draw inferences about the survival of democracy from answers to survey questions’ (p. 102).

The rest of the second part of the book discusses potential causes of these signs of democratic crisis and focuses especially on economic factors and societal divisions/political polarisation. While this part of the book presents the most relevant possible explanations, it rarely tries to adjudicate between them. I suspect that some readers would have preferred Przeworski to take a stronger stance on some of these questions, but one of the very strengths of the book is that it introduces different arguments without trying to push one of them further. It provides a lot of food for thought. For readers who are interested in learning more about how political-economic changes in recent decades may explain some of the major tendencies that we observe in democracies today (some of which are discussed above), this part of the book will be a great starting point.

In the last part of the book, Przeworski looks into the future. Can democracy back-

slide even in developed, long-time democracies? And how would this likely happen? Przeworski argues that democracy works best when there is something at stake in an election, but not too much (chapter 9). Deep societal/political divisions are therefore dangerous, as the stakes will be too high. It may make governments more willing to go to extreme lengths to win on election day and to avoid making concessions to the opposition. In such divided democratic societies, we have seen in recent years how parties have changed electoral maps and rules to increase their odds of winning and how the voices of independent media have been muted. Many of these changes may, in and of themselves, not constitute a clear and visible break with democracy. They may not even constitute a breach of the constitution or any formal law. That does not make them any less concerning, however, as many small, incremental changes that are made in the same direction can add up and have a large cumulative effect. The book convincingly demonstrates that democratic backsliding is not something that happens overnight. Rather, it is a gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions (chapter 10).

In this regard, a key dilemma that Przeworski discusses at some length is what reaction we can expect from the voters who benefit from the policies of a government that gradually subverts democracy. These voters will receive the policies that they prefer in the short run, but this will come at the cost of (gradual) democratic backsliding. Partisan voters, even if they support democracy, may tolerate minor violations of democratic norms and institutions as long as the policies they are getting are the policies they want implemented. But in the long run the cumulative effect of many minor violations will be decisive. It will become apparent that a red line has been crossed; that democracy is in peril. Przeworski teaches us that, as voters who care about democracy, we should

not accept *any* violations of democratic norms, even if the result of the violations is policies that conform to our ideological convictions. There is something bigger at stake. In that sense, the discussion of the future of democracy should be considered as essential reading for any democratic citizen.

Overall, *Crises of Democracy* is an essential reading for anyone interested in the current state of affairs in consolidated democracies. The book engages with many difficult and complex questions, but it does so in a very accessible way. The book should thus strongly appeal to academics and non-academics alike who care about democracy and are worried about the current state of affairs.

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Isabela Mares and Lauren E. Young:
Conditionality & Coercion: Electoral Clientelism in Eastern Europe
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Along the sinuous course of post-communist transitions, the (re)construction of electoral democracy has meandered from 'inexorable optimism' (p. 4) to stalemated simultaneous challenges [Offe 2004], to unexpected Euro-success [Vachudova 2005] and recent 'backsliding' [Vanhuysse 2006, 2008; Greskovits 2015]. While a highly developed literature dissects most of these developments, some underlying phenomena that cut across porous conceptual boundaries, have remained under-researched. Picking up the gauntlet, Mares and Young delve into the intricacies of 'electoral practices premised on coercion or offers of contingent favors' as a gateway to raising 'broader questions about the achievements and shortcomings of democratic elections